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Testimony before the Mental Health Subcommittee of the Bipartisan
Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety
January 29, 2013

To the members of the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety, my name is Kerri Dirgo and I am from Bridgeport, CT. I am here today to respectfully request that you take a position against proposed legislation that would limit the rights of young adults with a mental health diagnosis, specifically bills that resemble outpatient commitment. I feel this way because as a young adult with a mental health diagnosis, this could affect me, and the way that I access treatment.

The positive experiences I've had while voluntarily receiving mental health treatment cannot be quantified. Having the opportunity to choose recovery, and accept support has given me a sense that "I am in control of my own life," resulting in me taking initiative, being more eager to get involved in the community beyond treatment, and seeing the mental health system as a tool for my success- as opposed to a punishment or "sentence" as if I've committed a crime.

When I was a minor within the DCF system, my choices were made for me, I was forced to go to therapy, despite the fact that I lacked the maturity, insight or even knowledge that I needed for treatment to actually help. If a person does not acknowledge they need help, any attempt at providing treatment will be futile.

In the end, will this just come down to forcing people to take medication? Is it about medicating people to keep them docile so the public can believe that they are safe from the crazy's? Are we going to allow our state to regress to institutionalization in a community setting?

What about the financial cost that is intertwined with mental health treatment? Mandating those with a mental health diagnosis to comply with treatment would place a long-term financial burden on the state because many of the young people who would be candidates for outpatient commitment are already dependent on the state.

A second consideration is the fact that the roles and relationships between care providers and those receiving care would be greatly impacted. The providers go from being a support, providing guidance, and encouragement- to an authority figure that cannot be trusted.

Setting up a punitive system will inevitably lead to punishment without support, further marginalizing those who already feel shame, humiliation, and self-doubt, on a daily basis. Will you encourage negative stereotypes and discrimination against individuals who are struggling to regain a sense of purpose in our community?

Since I made the decision to seek the support that I needed to achieve recovery, I am now a young woman with a sense of ownership in my life. I take responsibility for my actions and I do not use my diagnosis to avoid negative outcomes for the decisions that I make. I have become a leader in my recovery and I am now a leader in the recovery community amongst my peers.

Empower us with choice, and make recovery supports available to us within our local communities. Help us to spread the word that recovery is the solution.

In conclusion, I respectfully request that you discourage an approach that would limit the rights of individuals to choose when and where they access mental health treatment.

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